


The development of private farms in Vietnam

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The Development of Private Farms in Vietnam

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to explore the entities that have developed private farms (*trang trai*) in Vietnam. Various types of private farms have emerged in the last ten years. It is noteworthy that the owners of private farms are not necessarily agricultural households but also include government officials and the urban rich. Based on data collected from the author's field surveys in Vietnam from 2006 to 2011, the paper attempts to categorize patterns in the development of private farms and analyze their differences. The paper argues that private farms developed by agricultural households are still limited because of the difficulty of consolidating land.

Keywords: private farm, *trang trai*, business history, agricultural household, land market

JEL classification: O13, Q12, Q15

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1. Introduction

The development of private farms (*trang trai* in Vietnamese) is one of the remarkable changes in the Doi Moi era of industrialization and modernization of Vietnamese agriculture. Most agricultural producers in Vietnam today are small-scale households that own less than one hectare on average. However, the number of entities that cultivate relatively large-scale land has gradually increased since the late 1980s.

The Vietnamese land law aims to give people equal opportunity to use land; it does not allow a single household to use more than three hectares.¹ Therefore, the increasing number of entities that own large landholdings by consolidating smaller ones is inconsistent with the government's policy. Nevertheless, in 2000, the Vietnamese government accepted the emergence of these entities and even began to encourage their development by defining them as "private farms" in Circular No. 69 of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. The government might have recognized the necessity to develop strong agricultural producers to compete with foreign products. Owners of private farms are able to use more land than they are allowed to by additionally leasing land from the government. As a result, the number of private farms has dramatically increased throughout the country, especially in southern Vietnam. However, private farms developed by agricultural households are still limited, even though the government's policy on farm development suggested that agricultural households are the basis for the development of private farms.

When private farms originally emerged in the late 1990s, Vietnamese researchers conducted surveys on the developers of private farms and the process of private farm development (Vu et al. 1996; Le 2000; Truong 2000; Nguyen 2001; Le 2006). They analyzed the general situation and issues of private farms until the beginning of the 2000s by referring to case studies from specific regions. According to these studies, the owners of private farms varied depending on the region and the product they produced. However, few studies provided a comprehensive picture of the diversified private farms in the country. Tran (2003) described some regional features of private farms but did not examine the factors influencing the different types of owners of private farms.

This paper aims to identify the successful developers of private farms in Vietnam. It will analyze not only the existing literature, but also policy documents, official statistics, recent newspaper articles, and the author's case studies. This

¹ This restriction applies to the land for annual products (mainly rice), salt, and aquaculture. The lands for perennial products and forestry have a different restriction.

paper will first summarize the trend of the development of private farms in Vietnam by using official statistics and documents. It will then categorize patterns in the development of private farms based on the author's field surveys in rural areas of Vietnam from 2006 to 2011. Finally, this paper will examine the reasons for the agricultural households' difficulty in developing private farms.

2. Changes to policies on private farms in Vietnam

It was only after 1988 that individual households in Vietnam were allowed to become independent management entities of agricultural activities. The government, under Resolution 10 of 1988, transferred the agricultural production system in rural areas from agricultural cooperatives to the individual households. In 1993, the land law allowed individual households to use land in the long term. These policy changes contributed to the growth of agricultural households.

Around the late 1980s, entities cultivating relatively large-scale land began to emerge, especially in southern Vietnam, despite the restrictions in Vietnam's land law on the area of land that each household could use. The government aimed to give equal opportunity to anyone who intended to engage in agriculture. However, the entities that emerged in the late 1980s often consolidated more land than each household was allowed to use. This phenomenon was inconsistent with the government's policy.

Meanwhile, Vietnamese agriculture began to globalize in the 1990s. Exports and imports of agricultural products grew and Vietnamese agricultural products faced increasing international competition. Under such circumstances, the Vietnamese government might have recognized the need to develop competitive and efficient agricultural producers.

In 2000, the Vietnamese government conceded to enlarge the area that each agricultural entity could hold by leasing them additional land. The government defined agricultural entities that satisfied a certain farm size or output level as a "private farm" (see Figure 1).² Resolution 3 suggested that the household economy is the basis of private farm development and encouraged the development of private farms. Other policies related to private farm development, such as financing and labor employment, followed Resolution 3 (Phan Si Man 2006, pp.85–91). The revised land law of 2003 is particularly important because it

² The definition of private farm partly changed under Circular No. 27 of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in April 2011. However, this paper uses the former definition of private farm shown in Figure 1, as the author's field surveys on private farms referred to in this paper were conducted before this change.

established a legal basis (in addition to policy) to encourage the development of private farms. With these legal foundations, the number of private farms shot up in the beginning of the 2000s.

Figure 1: Definition of private farm (*trang trai*)

| | |
|---|--|
| Private farm (<i>trang trai</i>) should satisfy the condition of either 1 or 2 as follows. | |
| I. Annual output | |
| | North/Central coastal areas: 40 million VND, South/Central highland: 50 million VND |
| II. Management scale | |
| i. Agriculture | |
| a) Annual crop; | North/Central coastal areas: 2 ha, South/Central highland: 3 ha |
| b) Perennial crop; | North/Central coastal areas: 3 ha, South/Central highland: 5 ha (in case of pepper production: 0.5 ha) |
| ii. Forestry; | 10 ha in every region |
| iii. Livestock | |
| a) Cattle: breeding/milking; | 10 heads, fattening: 50 heads |
| b) Pig: breeding; | 20 heads, fattening: 100 heads |
| c) Goats: breeding; | 100 heads, fattening: 200 heads |
| d) Poultry; | 2000 heads |
| iv. Aquaculture; | 2 ha (in case of shrimp: 1 ha) |
| * In case of mixed farm, follows condition I. | |
| Source: Circular No. 69 of Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, General Statistics Office (69/2000/TTST/BNN-TCTK) , Circular No. 74 of Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (74/2003/TT-BNN) . | |

3. Overview of private farm development in Vietnam

This section will review the features of private farm development in Vietnam and its regional diversity.

3.1 Features of private farm development in Vietnam

Table 1 shows the land area in use and the number of employees per private farm in 2001 and 2006.³ In 2006, private farms in the country used about eight

³ Although the latest official data on private farms is available in the 2011 Rural, Agricultural, and Fishery Census, the census has limited data on private farms.

times as much land as the average agricultural household, and had three or four permanent employees. According to data from the Rural, Agricultural, and Fishery Census in 2006 (General Statistics Office (GSO) 2007), the average rate of sale per production of private farms was about 96%. Private farms generally own more machinery than the average agricultural household, such as tractors, electric motors, petrol engines, and insecticide sprayers.

From 2001 to 2006, while there was a tendency for the land scale per private farm to decrease, the average number of laborers per private farm increased. The income per private farm grew in most regions, and it was generally higher than that of the average household in the country as of 2006 (see Table 2 in the next subsection).

Agricultural modernization is a process of two changes: an increase in the use of capital equipment such as machinery in production, and an increase in the rate of sale per production. These changes contribute to increased income from agriculture, which leads to improved living conditions of agricultural entities (Tsuji 2004).⁴ Thus, it could be said that private farms are the entities that advance agricultural modernization.

Table 1: Land area in use and number of employees per private farm

| | Land area in use (ha) | | Number of regularly employed laborers | | Land area in use per general agricultural household (ha) |
|-------------|-----------------------|------|---------------------------------------|------|--|
| Year | 2001 | 2006 | 2001 | 2006 | 2006 |
| Agriculture | 5.5 | 4.0 | 0.9 | 3.3 | 0.6 |
| Livestock | n.a. | n.a. | 1.4 | 2.9 | n.a. |
| Forestry | 20.3 | 18.5 | 1.0 | 3.7 | 2.2 |
| Aquaculture | 3.5 | 3.3 | 1.1 | 3.5 | n.a. |

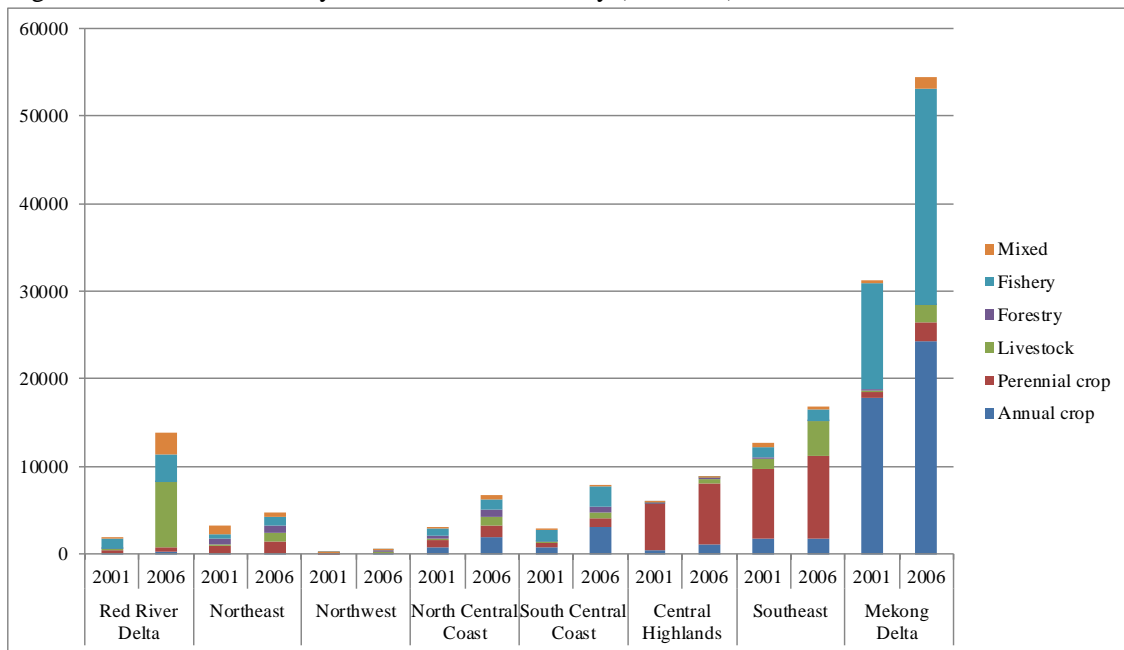
Source: GSO (2007)

3.2 Regional differences in the development of private farms

This section will examine the development of private farms by region. While the number of private farms in the country has increased and their management form has become modernized, there is regional diversity in their development. In particular, the differences between the north and the south are significant.

⁴ In addition to these changes, several advantages of large-scale agricultural management that some studies showed such as easier access to formal credit (Nguyen and Le 2005) and potential income equalization (Kojin 2007) may contribute to increased income of private farms.

Figure 2: Number of farms by area and kinds of activity (unit: farm)



Source: GSO (2003) (2007)

First, the number of private farms and their products vary by region. Figure 2 shows the number of private farms by area and product. The majority of private farms have developed in the south. In 2006, the largest number (about 54,000) of private farms existed in the Mekong Delta; the region had over half of the private farms in the country. Most of its private farms produced rice and aquaculture products, which are the main export agricultural products of Vietnam. In terms of provinces, a larger number of private farms developed in Bac Lieu province (aquaculture), Kien Giang province (annual crops), An Giang province (annual crops and aquaculture), and Soc Trang province (annual crops and aquaculture).

The Southeast and Central Highlands regions also had a large number of private farms (In 2006, Southeast had 16,891 farms and Central Highlands had 8,730 farms). They mainly produced perennial industrial products for export. The largest amount of crops produced by private farms in the Central Highlands were pepper, coffee, cashews, and rubber, in that order. In the Southeast, the most commonly produced crops were rubber, pepper, cashews, and fruits.

In the north, the number of private farms increased from 2001 to 2006, albeit to a lesser extent than in the south. The number of private farms grew particularly in the Red River Delta, especially in the livestock sector (from 156 farms in 2001 to 7,436 farms in 2006). The number of livestock farms sharply increased in Thai Binh, Bac Ninh, and Hung Yen provinces. In addition, in the northern

mountainous areas, where the majority of private farms are engaged in forestry, the number of livestock and aquaculture farms also increased.

Private farms in the north tend to diversify their products more than in the south. The mixed farms, which produce more than one kind of product, accounted for 11% of the total private farms in the north, compared to less than 2% in the south in 2006 (GSO 2007).

The second regional difference is the farm size. Between the north and the south, there are significant differences in the sizes of the agricultural private farms (although little differences are observed in the forestry and aquaculture sectors). In 2006, the average agricultural farm size was 2.1 hectares in the north and 4.8 hectares in the south. Farm size in the Red River Delta was the smallest at 0.4 hectares per farm, whereas in the Southeast it was 6.3 hectares per farm (GSO 2007).

Because of the regional differences in products and farm size, the income per private farm tends to be higher in the south than in the north (Table 2). The income in the Southeast jumped from 38 million in 2001 to 85 million in 2006, and was the highest among the regions in 2006. This may be a result of favorable land conditions and the majority of private farms in the Southeast producing high-margin export industrial products on a large scale.

Table 2: Average income per private farm (unit: million VND/year)

| year | 2001 | 2006 | cf.) Average household income in 2006 |
|------------------|------|------|---------------------------------------|
| Red River Delta | 47.2 | 47.4 | 30.1 |
| Northeast | 30.4 | 52.3 | 26.4 |
| Northwest | 27.6 | 47.0 | 22.0 |
| North Coastal | 25.8 | 38.5 | 21.5 |
| South Coastal | 43.2 | 38.3 | 27.9 |
| Central Highland | 23.1 | 64.5 | 30.9 |
| Southeast | 38.2 | 85.2 | 55.4 |
| Mekong Delta | 79.1 | 64.1 | 32.5 |
| Whole country | 32.3 | 61.4 | 32.4 |

Source: Income of private farms in 2001 and 2006: GSO (2003, 2006)

Average household income was calculated using data from GSO (2008)

4. Developers of private farms and the process of private farm development

This section will examine the developers of private farms who succeeded in earning a higher income than surrounding agricultural households by consolidating

a certain scale of land. In general, owners of private farms earn more than other agricultural households. However, there are differences among the private farms, and not all private farms are well developed.

4.1 Categorization of private farms by owner

Table 3 categorizes the types of ownership of private farms.⁵

Table 3: Categories of owners of well-developed farms

| Categories of owners of well-developed farms | Observable case | Region | Scale | Kind of land |
|---|--|--------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 Agricultural household develops farm. | | | | |
| a) Local household agglomerate land by themselves. | Rice farms in An Giang province | South | Large, very large | Rice field |
| | Dragon fruit farms in Binh Thuan province. | South | Small | Rice field, fruit field |
| b) Immigrants agglomerate land by themselves. | Fruits/ livestock farms in Long An province. | South | Large, very large | Sour land |
| 2 Government officials (retired, non-retired) develop private farms under certain government land allotment policy. | Forestry farms in Yen Bai province | North | Middle, large | Waste forest |
| 3 Urban rich develop private farms in rural areas, producing products with high market value. | Rubber farms in Binh Duong province | South | Very large | Brushland |
| | Mixed farms in the suburbs of Ha Noi | North | Middle | Brushland |

Source: Author's field survey,

Tuoi Tre newspaper article "Pha rung lam trang trai, 6 July 2010.

In the first category, agricultural households are the owners of private farms. They are either local agricultural households or immigrants. The rice farms in An Giang province and the dragon fruit farms in Binh Thuan province are good examples of this category. In An Giang province, a portion of the local agricultural households agglomerates over 10 hectares of land and produces rice. One of the reasons that land was consolidated was the introduction of three-term rice production around 1990. Some households had difficulty adopting this new method and had to sell their land, while other agricultural households that successfully adopted the method and wanted to enlarge their rice production got a chance to consolidate land.⁶

Meanwhile, in Binh Thuan province, where dragon fruit has been produced

⁵ The scale in Table 3 follows Appendix I at the end of the document.

⁶ The data are based on the author's field survey in Tay Phu commune, Thoai Son district, An Giang province conducted on 25 August 2010 with the cooperation of Can Tho University.

since before 1975 for self-consumption, some local agricultural households enlarged the scale of dragon fruit production for export as the market opened in 1990. Even though the scale of each private farm is not big (1 to 3 hectares), many dragon fruit farms in this area succeed in increasing their income by producing dragon fruit in both the rainy season and the dry season. As many dragon fruit farms introduced the new lighting system in their fields, production in the dry season also became possible. The production land of these private farms were originally rice fields, which were allocated under the Doi Moi policy. Most of the private farm owners changed their land usage from rice production to dragon fruit production. Some owners bought additional land from other agricultural households that gave up dragon fruit production due to technical reasons, and enlarged their farm further.⁷

An example of agricultural households that migrated from other regions to develop private farms can be found in Long An province. There, some immigrants and local agricultural households consolidated over seven hectares of land, generally sour land not suitable for rice production, and began to produce fruits, aquaculture, and livestock such as pigs and poultry. These immigrants included those who migrated under the Don Thap Moi policy in the 1990s and the free immigrants who arrived after 2000 aiming to buy cheaper land for enlarging agricultural production.⁸

In the second category, government officials including retired soldiers are owners of private farms under a certain government land distribution policy. This type of ownership is found more in the north than in the south. An example is the forestry farms in Yen Bai province, the northern mountainous area. Several retired officials and retired soldiers in the region received over 10 hectares of forestry land through the land distribution policy in the beginning of the 1990s and exploited the land for private farms. They produced tea, cinnamon, and trees for pulp, whose markets have expanded rapidly since 1986. They developed private farms to develop regions, protect the environment, and increase their own income (Kojin 2007).

In the last category, the urban rich develop private farms in rural areas by producing crops that have relatively high margins in the market. An example is the

⁷ The data are based on the author's field survey (from 9 to 15 December 2007) and survey (from 25 December 2007 to 2 January 2008, conducted with the cooperation of the Institute of Economics in Hanoi) in Ham Thuan Nam district, Binh Thuan province.

⁸ The data are based on the author's field survey in Duc Hue and Thanh Hoa district, Long An province (from 4 to 7 April 2011, conducted with the cooperation of the Southern Institute of Sustainable Development in Ho Chi Minh City).

rubber farms in the provinces around Ho Chi Minh City. The wealthy people in Ho Chi Minh City bought the forestry land in some parts of Binh Phuoc province on a large scale (such as 50 hectares) under the local government's land policy, which has reclaimed desolate forests and has exploited the vast land by hiring domestic labor to produce rubber since the mid-2000s (*Tuoi Tre* newspaper article, “*Pha rung lam trang trai*”, 6 July 2010). The export demand for rubber has continuously increased in recent years. As a result, the price has become higher, which could result in large profits for rubber farmers.

The suburbs of Hanoi have a similar situation. According to the author's field survey in Soc Son district in Hanoi, the wealthy people in Hanoi received a relatively large brushland under the government land allotment policy. Since the late 1990s, they have invested in the land exploitation to produce fruits, mushrooms, and aquaculture. Similar to the case of the Southeast region, the entities who work in agricultural activities are not the urban rich in Hanoi but the domestic laborers.⁹

4.2 Factors contributing to differences in owners of private farms

This section will explore the reasons for the diversity of private farm owners and the limited success of agricultural households in developing private farms.

4.2.1. The mechanism of farm development initiated by agricultural households in the south

Based on the author's interviews with the local governments of Binh Thuan, An Giang, and Long An provinces, the number of local agricultural households that can develop large-scale private farms remains limited. The local agricultural households that can develop large-scale private farms and increase their income in An Giang and Binh Thuan provinces have three common features. First, they received relatively large-scale paddy fields when the Doi Moi began at the end of the 1980s. Second, they succeeded in introducing some new production methods. Third, they produce certain traditional regional products with established distribution networks.

In both An Giang and Binh Thuan provinces, the land is not always available and the chances of getting extra land are rare. In An Giang, land became available when three-term rice production was introduced in the area. In Binh Thuan, land became available when some households gave up dragon fruit production. Land

⁹ The data are based on the author's field survey in Soc Son district, Hanoi City, conducted on 8 December 2005.

availability is not necessarily high in regions where the land was originally intended for certain agricultural products. In both provinces, the paddy fields allocated under the Doi Moi policy were an important factor in developing private farms. At the beginning of Doi Moi, the paddy fields were distributed according to household size; thus, it can be said that the number of family members of owners of well-developed private farms was relatively large at that time. It was comparatively easy for these households to manage large-scale land as the household already had many laborers.

On the other hand, it seems that agricultural households with different conditions migrated to other regions and cultivated the land even though they were of low quality. In Long An province, it appears to be relatively easy for immigrants to access land. Most of the land in this area is sour land that is not suitable for rice production and remains cheap and unused. Moreover, new markets have opened up for products such as pork and poultry, as the region is close to Ho Chi Minh City.

4.2.2 Reasons that government officials tend to become the owners of private farms in the north

This paper only discusses the case of well-developed private farms established by agricultural households in the south; whether they exist in the north is unknown. Agricultural households face certain difficulties in consolidating land in the north, especially in the Red River Delta.

The first difficulty is that the rice fields distributed in the late 1980s under the Doi Moi policy were small. In the Red River Delta, this was due to the higher population density. In the northern mountainous area, this was due to the endowment of rice fields in the region.¹⁰

Second, the liquidity of the land market is low. While the liquidity of agricultural land is low even in the south, it is much lower in the north. According to Marsh and MacAulay (2003, pp.17–18), the lack of available land appears to be a bigger issue in the north than in the south because agricultural workers do not have another job.

Under such conditions in the north, it can be concluded that land consolidation tends to occur under certain land distribution policies. Therefore, government officials may have an advantage over agricultural households in

¹⁰ In some provinces in the Red River Delta, the land reallocation policy continued even in the 1990s to ensure that each household had equal opportunities for rice production. Thus, the production scale per household in the Red River Delta remained small.

accessing information about land.

4.2.3 Difficulties for agricultural households in exploiting suburban land

As shown in Section 3, private farms in the Southeast region tend to earn a higher income due to the export of industrial products. The owners of these large-scale private farms are often the urban rich. The urban rich take advantage of this chance to increase their income more than the agricultural households do for the following reasons. First, the initial investment is large. The price of land in the Southeast region is rising because the land is appropriate for producing products such as rubber, pepper, and cashew, which have an expanded export market. One agricultural household owner who develops private farms in Long An province told the author that he considered buying land in Binh Duong province to produce rubber, but did not push through with it because the land was too expensive. Instead, he bought sour land in Long An province. In addition to the land price, the cost of land exploitation might also be high. The land for producing rubber is often originally brushland, and the farm owner has to hire a large number of laborers to exploit the land to start planting rubber (*Tuoi Tre* newspaper article, “*Pha rung lam trang trai*”, 6 July 2010).

Second, it takes several years for farm owners to harvest industrial perennial products such as rubber, pepper, and cashews. During this period, the farmers have no income and they have to hire laborers to take care of the land and the trees.

Overall, although the government policy on private farm development in 2000 suggests that agricultural households are the basis for private farm development, the number of agricultural households in Vietnam that can successfully develop private farms remains limited.

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to show a comprehensive picture of the development of private farms in Vietnam. In particular, the paper focused on the developers of private farms. Although available case studies are limited, the paper identified certain mechanisms behind the development of private farms in Vietnam.

Despite government policies that encourage their participation, agricultural households are not the primary entities in the development of private farms. According to the author's field surveys conducted from 2006 to 2011, there are three categories of private farm ownership: (1) owners are agricultural households that consolidate land by themselves, (2) owners are government officials who develop the farm under government land allotment policies, and (3) owners are the

urban rich who develop farms in the suburbs by producing export crops with high margins. The major reason for such different patterns appears to be the regional conditions of land acquisition.

Private farms developed by agricultural households remain limited because of the lack of available land for agricultural households. Even in the south where the land liquidity is relatively high, the basis of consolidation of land by private farms is often the rice fields that were allocated at the beginning of Doi Moi.

Further creation of private farms initiated by agricultural households may depend on the development of the land market. In addition, there are indications that some restrictions on the land use rights, including the usable scale of land per households and the duration of land use in particular, prevent agricultural households from consolidating land. Thus, the deregulation of land policy is also a major factor influencing the creation of private farms initiated by agricultural households.

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<Newspaper>

Tuoi Tre

Appendix

Appendix I: Private farms by size in Table 3

| | Annual crop | Perennial crop | Livestock (pig) | Livestock (poultry) | Forestry | Aquaculture |
|------------|-------------|----------------|-----------------|---------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Small | under 2 ha | under 3 ha | under 50 heads | under 1000 heads | under 10 ha | under 1 ha |
| Middle | 2-5 ha | 3-5 ha | 50-199 heads | 1000-2999 heads | 10-20 ha | 1-5 ha |
| Large | 5-10 ha | 5-10 ha | 200-499 heads | 3000-9999 heads | 20-50 ha | 5-10 ha |
| Very large | over 10 ha | over 10 ha | over 500 heads | over 10000 heads | over 50 ha | over 10 ha |